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ABSTRACT

Based on the premise that preschool and school settings fail to take into account children's popular cultural interests when developing curriculum content, this study explored the potential of popular culture for motivating young children to engage in literacy and oracy practices. Participating were 94 three- and four-year-olds in two nurseries in inner city areas of a northern English city. The majority of families served by these programs were working class, and many lived in extremely difficult economic circumstances. Literacy activities related to the Teletubbies television program were introduced in these settings. Qualitative data were gathered using field notes, photographs, children's work, and interviews with staff. Data were analyzed for themes, patterns, and significant moments. As illustrated by one specific activity, children making tubby custard and writing their own Teletubby recipes, the findings suggested that incorporating the Teletubby popular cultural text into the curriculum provided motivation and excitement for many children, some of whom were not usually willing members of the "literacy club." (Contains 44 references.) (KB)

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Teletubby Tales: Popular culture in the Early Years Language and Literacy Curriculum

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Teletubby Tales: Popular Culture in the Early Years Language and Literacy Curriculum

Abstract

The aim of the study reported in this paper was to explore the potential that popular culture has for motivating young children to engage in literacy and oracy practices in the early years. Pre-school settings and schools regularly fail to take cognisance of children's popular cultural interests in their development of curriculum content (Luke, 1993). Literacy practices in most nurseries and schools are located within dominant cultural discourses and in the case of many industrialised societies, this means that the curriculum usually reflects the cultural norms of white middle class communities. In an attempt to disrupt these dominant discourses, literacy activities related to the Teletubbies were introduced into two nurseries in England. Data were gathered using field notes, photographs and interviews. The paper discusses how the incorporation of popular cultural texts into the curriculum provided motivation and excitement for many children, some of whom were not usually willing members of 'the literacy club' (Smith, 1988).

Teletubby Tales: Popular culture in the Early Years Language and Literacy Curriculum

The aim of the study reported in this paper was to explore the potential that popular culture has for motivating young children to engage in literacy and oracy practices in the early years. Literacy activities related to the Teletubbies were introduced into two nurseries in England. 'The Teletubbies' is a television programme, created for very young children, which focuses on four cuddly creatures who live together in a bunker. The decision to incorporate the Teletubby discourse into the language and literacy curriculum was based on the huge popularity the programme has enjoyed with the under 5s in the UK. This popularity may be attributed in part to the fact that the programme has captured the essence of a 'postmodern childhood' (Wagg, 1992) in which children's media:

> ...troubles less and less to mediate the world to the child, or to impart knowledge or skills. Instead TV (along with other mass media) is the world, and it happily discusses itself.
>
> (Wagg, 1992, p109).

Thus the Teletubbies have television screens on their tummies on which are featured short films relating to children's interests. These films are repeated, mirroring many children's experiences of watching recurrent sequences from their favourite films and television programmes through the use of video recorders. Whatever the reasons for the attraction, it is clear that the programme has attracted a phenomenal amount of attention from young and old alike. This wave of popularity has, to some extent, drowned dissident voices which have condemned the programme for its language, repetitiveness and supposed lack of educational focus (Messenger-Davies 1997). And despite Andy Medwell, an English media studies lecturer, referring to the character Tinky Winky as the 'first role model for queer toddlers' (Glaister, 1997), the UK has not seen the depth of furore which recently surfaced from the 'moral majority' in the USA over the programme's potential to corrupt innocent children. Instead, the criticism in the UK has focused on the perceived lack of educational potential in the programme. In 1997 Stephen Byers, the school's minister at the time commented that the Teletubbies was typical of a 'dumbing down' of children's television. This reaction is symptomatic of the establishment's attitude towards children's popular culture over the years (McDonnell, 1994) and one which serves to reinforce its exclusion from the curriculum.

Pre-school settings and schools regularly fail to take cognisance of children's popular cultural interests in their development of curriculum content (Luke, 1993). Literacy practices in most nurseries and schools are located within dominant cultural discourses (Lankshear and McClaren ,1993; Lankshear, 1997; Luke, 1993; Gee, 1996; Street, 1997). In the case of many industrialised societies, this means that the curriculum reflects the cultural norms of the white middle classes:

> Dominant social and cultural groups have been able to establish their language, and their knowledge priorities, learning styles, pedagogical preferences, etc., as the 'official examinable culture' of school. Their notions of important and useful knowledge, their ways of representing truth, their ways of arguing and establishing correctness, and their logics, grammars and language are established as the institutional norms by which academic and scholastic success is defined and assessed (Luke, 1993 p21).
>
> Lankshear, 1997, p30

Thus, children enter nursery doors and are surrounded by texts which are an established part of the 'canon' of children's literature. For many middle-class children, these texts are familiar and are an established feature of their particular 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1977). In addition, a detailed analysis of the content of these texts reveals that they usually reflect a version of the world which is unfamiliar to many working class children.

In any consideration of the cultural capital which young children bring to education in the early years, the role of popular culture must feature strongly. Popular culture is, for many children in industrialized societies, a major source of 'narrative desire' (Hilton, 1996). Much of children's popular culture is related to the media. Television programmes, video games, comics or the latest Disney video provide a plethora of texts which children become emotionally engaged with. Toy manufacturers soon offer a related set of toys, games and other related artefacts (see Kline, 1993) and this 'commercialized supersystem' (Clark, 1995, p8) then forms a large part of many children's imaginative and emotional lives.

Research which has outlined the potential of popular culture in the early years has focused largely on superhero play and related activities (Cupit, 1989; Paley, 1984; Kostelnick, Whiren and Stein, 1986; Orrellana, 1994; Dyson 1994, 1996, 1997). This work has been conducted primarily in Australia and the United States. In the UK, there has been little research pertaining to children's engagement with superhero narratives and the part that popular culture can play in the early years curriculum. The few studies that have appeared have focused on the exciting possibilities that work on media narratives, such as film and video, offers (Pompe, 1992, 1996; Whitely, 1996). There are obvious links between popular culture and literacy practices. The work of Dyson (1994; 1996; 1997; 1998) has informed our understanding of the way in which popular culture can engage children in writing activities which enable them to explore issues of power and identity. Dyson also illustrates how children transform popular cultural texts into stories which reflect the essential dynamics of childhood worlds. This work has been situated in classroom contexts which foster and celebrate children's cultural visions and the children in these studies appear to be highly motivated as a result of this affirmation. In a recent UK

study (Marsh, forthcoming), a socio-dramatic role-play area that was transformed into a Batman and Batwoman HQ and steeped with materials for promoting reading and writing was found to be highly stimulating for two classes of six and seven year old children. In particular, children who had been identified as previously uninterested in entering literacy-focused role play areas, all working class children, spent hours in the HQ engaged in literacy practices.

Motivation is a key to learning. Research on the role of motivation in learning has demonstrated that intrinsic motivation (Meece, Blumenfeld and Hoyle, 1988) is fundamental to successful learning. There has been found to be a relationship between intrinsic motivation and interest in the subject matter of tasks to be undertaken. Children's interest in the tasks they undertake have a significant effect on children's learning (Hidi, 1990; Schiefele 1991; Guthrie et al, 1996). Interest in learning tasks lead to an increase in the length of engagement with tasks, persistence and increased retention of knowledge (Hidi, 1990; Turner, 1995; Guthrie at al, 1996). Turner and Paris (1995) assert that motivation resides in the interaction between the child and the literacy environment rather than being something the child brings to literacy tasks. This somewhat counteracts the research that locates the problem with disaffected children themselves and their communities. In a recent international study which included surveys in areas of poverty, Elliot et al (1999) concluded that a key indicator of children's goal-seeking behaviour was:

> '...children's familial, peer and cultural perceptions about what constitutes real and meaningful educational achievement and the extent to which this is seen to be of such intrinsic or extrinsic value as to evoke significant effort'.
>
> (Elliot et al, 1999, p91)

This rather begs the question of why many children from working class communities have negative perceptions in the first place. The attempt to shift the focus away from the curriculum to children's immediate environments in the search for answers regarding lack of motivation brings with it the danger that we examine the symptom rather than the cause. If 'motivation for literacy is not necessarily a quality that children bring to instruction' (Turner and Paris, 1995, p671) then we should be looking closely at the language and literacy diet offered in order to ascertain whether or not it holds interest for children. Literacy tasks in nurseries and schools should be rooted in children's daily lives if this motivation is to be enhanced. Smogarinsky and O'Donnel-Allen (1998) note that educators should develop:

> '...a notion of engagement that takes into account learners' cultural and social histories and views their relationships with texts in terms of this vast web of experience that they bring to particular classroom episodes. Engagement, like other aspects of activity, is "nested" (Cazden, 1988, p198) in multiple social contexts that must be acknowledged and accounted for.

(Smogarinsky and O'Donnell-Allen, 1998, p552)

It would seem imperative that we recognise the cultural values and 'signifying practices' (Storey, 1993, p2) that all young children bring with them to nursery, kindergarten and school in order to ensure that these are reflected in the early years curriculum.

This study was conducted in order to assess the potential that popular culture has for motivating children to sustain interest in language and literacy activities in the early years. The study was undertaken in two nurseries. The nurseries were situated in inner-city areas of a northern English city. They served diverse communities which included African-Caribbean, Pakistani, Bengali, Chinese, Yemeni, Somali and white British and Irish families. The majority of the families were working-class and, in many cases, lived in extremely difficult economic circumstances. 42 children attended Nursery A per session and 52 children per session attended Nursery B. The study involved working with 3 and 4 year old children in these nurseries over ten sessions. During this time, a variety of literacy activities which were related to the Teletubbies were introduced into the curriculum. The activities were set up and children were free to choose them. Qualitative data were collected using field notes, photographs, children's work and interviews with nursery staff. In the case of field notes, brief notes were made in the setting which were then written up afterwards. Data was then analysed for themes, patterns and significant moments. This paper focuses on one of the activities only, the making of tubby custard. Mindful of the need to ensure that the data and analysis present a 'recognisable reality' (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, p147) to the research participants, a draft version of the report was given to the heads of the nursery involved. Although this procedure did lead to comments which confirmed my interpretation of events, those responses are not included in this report.

The difficulty of representing the world of children has been noted elsewhere (Alldred, 1998). The analyses in this report are presented with an acknowledgement of the dangers inherent in interpreting children's words and actions from an adult perspective and thus constructing children as 'other' in research. In an attempt to enable the children to comment on the interpretations made, I produced a book from the photographs I had taken with the children during the 'Tubby custard' activities. The book contained a simple narrative on the research process and identified the main conclusions I had arrived at from the study. Some of the children's responses confirmed my interpretations; other children simply enjoyed the book as a narrative and had no comment to make on its portrayal of their reactions to the Teletubby activities.

Teletubby mania

Because of the popularity of the Teletubby programme with young children, I decided to introduce a number of activities related to the discourse. One of these was the making of 'Tubby custard' and is the focus for this paper. The Teletubbies regularly eat pink custard which is a recurring motif in the show. The activity consisted of the children making Tubby custard and then creating their own Teletubby recipes. The children were introduced to recipe cards. The use of recipe cards was modelled and the children were introduced to key features of the instructional genre. Once the children had made and eaten the custard, they were invited to write their own Teletubby recipes. Paper which contained images of the Teletubbies on the top had been prepared for this purpose.

In both nurseries, the tubby custard activity had an electrifying effect on the children. There was immediate and widespread interest in the proceedings and attempts to impose limits on group size proved very difficult, as these notes from my diary of the project indicate:

> I had to give up trying to limit the number of children who made the tubby custard. I had 13 or 14 around me each time. I initially attempted to limit the group, but each time I tried I had another wave of onlookers and children crying, "Can I do that?" Eventually, I decided to just get on with it and hope for the best. Occasionally a member of the nursery staff would come by and say, "Are you OK?" I must have hidden my desperation very well as I shouted, "Fine!" and they all left me to it. The children loved the activity. The discussion of the recipe card and modelling which I managed to squeeze in amongst the excitement was interspersed with the children's discussion of the Teletubby programmes and related merchandise. There was absolute focus from everyone throughout.
>
> Today, the staff had left 'Triangle Room' for me to set up the tubby custard activity. I assumed that this would help me to limit the number of children taking part, as I could close the door to the room when I had a group of four or five. This would definitely be preferable to last time! Then, I was at a table in the middle of the nursery. It was impossible to limit the number of children coming along to watch and try to join in, such was the excitement engendered by the activity. I made the custard with 8 or 9 at a time, rather than wasting half the session persuading children to do something else. This had also happened at Nursery B. I had intended making the custard with no more children than 5 or 6 at a time. There, I had up to 14 clamouring to take part in each session. In some sessions, when I told children that they would have a turn later, they simply tried to get a good vantage point near the activity, refusing to move away and take part in anything else. So, 'Triangle Room'

appeared to be a haven of tranquility in comparison to those experiences. Nevertheless, we were interrupted by frequent forays into the room by inquisitive children and noses were pressed against the window longingly throughout the session.

It was clear that at the very moment the Teletubbies were introduced, a tremor of thrill ricocheted around the nurseries which continued to reverberate throughout the sessions. Interviews with nursery teachers and assistants confirmed that there was a higher than usual level of interest in the Teletubby activities:

> 'There was definitely more interest. Children who wouldn't have joined in with an activity with an adult were really keen, weren't they, and motivated? They were all identifying with the Teletubbies...There was a lot of excitement across all the nursery, with older and younger children.'
>
> Catherine, Head of Nursery B.

> 'Yeah, I would definitely say that the children were really excited about it, much more than usual. They love the Teletubbies.'
>
> Yvonne, Nursery Assistant, Nursery A

I was talking to Catherine about her perceptions of the children's interest during this particular session. She said that there was no doubt the children had been more excited than usual. In order to confirm this, she asked three nursery assistants who were tidying up, "Don't you think the children have been more interested in writing the recipes and the Teletubbies things than usual?" They all firmly agreed. Sandra mentioned Aisha's response in particular as one that she had noticed, "...cos she doesn't usually join in much".

'Excitement' was a term often used by a number of the nursery workers to describe the reactions of the children and the descriptions of the effects on the children appeared to refer to the nurseries as a whole. No doubt part of this excitement was related to the fact that the activity was centred on food, a key signifier for children. After children had shared the book which related the story and findings of the research, I asked them what they thought I had found out. Jason replied, "Teletubbies and people writed more...people eated more". The two were inextricably related for him. Yet the excitement went far beyond the making and eating of the custard. Children were very keen to write their own recipes, literally running over to the writing area to join in at times.

There were children who had enthusiastically joined in the reading and writing activities who nursery staff were particularly surprised about. This was a

recurrent theme of the study. Sometimes, the nursery staff directly observed the reactions of particular children and commented on them:

> 'With the recipe, there were a couple of boys who wouldn't normally have a go at writing. If I'd have asked Ted to come and write, he wouldn't have done it. It's because it had the Teletubbies on top.'
>
> Catherine

> 'I was surprised at Suzi. She doesn't normally want to write anything. I was surprised that she went over to the writing table with you.'
>
> Catherine

> 'I noticed Sean writing. That surprised me. He won't usually, but he loved that.'
>
> Sonya, Nursery Teacher, Nursery A

Like 'excitement', the word 'surprise' was a key signifier for the teachers. The Teletubbies had induced children to read and write who were normally disengaged with literacy events in the nursery. The children thus described were, with a few exceptions, working class boys. There has been a moral panic in recent years about the lack of interest many boys have in the literacy curriculum (Phillips, 1993; Reynolds, 1995), with widespread concerns that boys are underachieving in this area (Ofsted, 1993; Millard 1997). Work which has examined differently gendered patterns of literacy suggests that the apparent disinterest many boys have in reading and writing activities is evident in the early years (OFSTED, 1993). Much of the work written about the level of motivation of boys have towards literacy has treated boys as a homogenous group. In fact, it is clear that the underachievement of boys in literacy is particularly significant in groups of working class boys, both black and white (Gillborn and Gipps, 1996). It is also clear that this notion of underachievement is complex and has seen an over-reaction in some quarters as the achievement of girls in some subject areas increases (Raphael-Reed, 1999). The work on the Teletubbies appeared to attract new members to the literacy club:

> I told Safeena that Carlos had enjoyed writing the recipe. She said in a startled voice, "Carlos? Really? We have difficulty getting him to sit down to do anything, especially writing. He won't usually sit down, you know, he has a lot of problems."
>
> I told Carol that Joe had written a recipe for tubby toast. She was shocked. "Joe? Oh my goodness...Well, he never usually writes...he has problems with his sight and so he isn't confident with his writing."

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For these teachers, Carlos and Joe were synonymous with 'problems' and 'writing'. Carlos couldn't wait to get over to the writing table and, once there, wrote a number of recipes for tubby toast, tubby burgers and tubby pizza. Joe was similarly enthused and chose to stay in and continue to write even though he was offered the opportunity to go outside, an offer he usually jumped at. These were by no means isolated incidents. Tubby custard was made with 63 children in all. Only two did not want to go on to write their own recipes.

It was notable that the children sustained interest in the activities for long periods of time. The time spent on reading the recipe, making and eating tubby custard and writing their own recipes involved the children, on average, in 30-35 minutes of sustained activity. Taylor (1995) notes that persistence is a measure of motivation in tasks.

> Mena had arrived from the Yemen with her family a few months ago. She carried a plastic lunch box around with her all morning, unwilling to put it down in order to join in any activities. The previous day, staff had found a large number of small items from the nursery in the lunch box, ready to go home. I couldn't help but wonder what was in it today, what she saw as significant objects. She flittered about the nursery, resisting any attempts to become involved in anything which required her to let go of the box. She didn't speak to any other children, including children who spoke Yemeni Arabic. She avoided all contact with adults. Mena had a tiny face and a very serious expression. She would make eye contact with children and adults, but did not smile. I had begun to talk to a group of children about the Teletubbies recipe cards, ready to make Tubby custard, when Mena approached. She stood next to Yasmin. "Oh, lovely, you want to make Tubby custard, Mena?" She looked at me seriously. Her eyes went to the picture of the Teletubbies on the card. "Do you like the Teletubbies"? Here eyes returned to me. The other children began to join in the usual chorus of, "I like Teletubbies!" "I watch Teletubbies!" "I got Teletubbies video!" Mena sat down next to Yasmin. To my amazement, she put down her lunch-box and picked up a recipe card. I included her in the general discussion and she sustained interest throughout the activity. Once we had made and eaten the custard, she picked up her lunch-box and moved off, returning to her earlier pursuit of cruising the nursery. She had stayed with us for about twenty minutes.

For Mena, who was three years old, this was a significant development which indicated a high level of interest in the task. She had made definite choices about what she was willing to focus on. Taylor (1995) and Guthrie (1996) also identify volition as a significant factor in the demonstration of motivation for literacy tasks. Children in this study regularly demonstrated acts of volition in their determination to be involved in the tasks:

> At one point, so many were crowded around the table that it was difficult for children to carve out a space for writing. Children persisted despite the crush, and some took their own desperate measures. Jason, for example, simply shifted his paper to the floor and carried on writing there. Other children took pen and paper into other areas.

Throughout the project, the activities stimulated oral work. The children repeatedly wove shared discourses based around the television programme and related merchandise. This collective pleasure was intensely enjoyable for them, a pleasure which Grace and Tobin (1998) have identified as 'jouissance' (However, for a critique of the notion of pleasure in relation to the consumption of popular culture, see Mercer, 1986). Jouissance is a term used by Roland Barthes (1975) to denote pleasure which is heightened and involves loss of subjectivity, in contrast to 'plaisir' which is a more mundane, conscious enjoyment. In this context, jouissance appeared to be linked with a greater motivation to engage in talk as children became more confident and engaged in tasks. As many of the 3 and 4 year olds taking part in the study were bilingual, this was an important consequence of the study.

> When I first went in to the nursery this morning, Nisa was clinging to Janet. Eventually, however, she was so interested in what was going on that she came over to the tubby custard activity and joined in. She said to me, "I got Teletubbies video. I got Teletubbies bed." I then asked her if she watched the Teletubbies, which one she liked best and so on. Catherine was very surprised that she had talked to me. She said, "Nisa talked to you and related to her life at home. Usually she is quiet and shy and withdrawn."
>
> Catherine was very keen to tell me about Jameel. After making tubby custard with me, he chatted away to her about the Teletubbies for some time, telling her about the videos he watched with his sister and describing his favourite extracts. Catherine said, "That's the first time Jameel has ever talked about home. He is normally so quiet and doesn't mention home at all."

Almost every child who joined in the Teletubbies activities talked about how the programme related to their home lives. They would talk animatedly about their favourite character, which videos they owned and other Teletubby merchandise they had or had seen:

Lianne: I'm Po, that red Teletubby
Nasia: I'm Po red.
Shaun: I got Teletubby video. I got lots of videos.
Peter: And I got Tinky Winky.
Nasia: I'm Tinky Winky.
Ansa: I watch Teletubbies. I got Teletubbies on my bed.

The children were marking their cultural territory, displaying their 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1977) to each other. Shared cultural icons led to shared understandings. There were few opportunities in both these nurseries for such shared dialogues which were situated within children's home lives. The children came from such disparate communities, each with their own literacy patterns and cultural practices. Educators should certainly be striving to reflect these practices in the everyday world of the nursery, but they should also be ensuring that the children weave threads between each other's worlds. This is usually done in respect to an established canon of children's literature in shared reading sessions. However, as Dyson (1992; 1996) has powerfully illustrated, this shared discourse is much richer when based on texts with 'sociocultural depth' (Dyson, 1992, p213).

Finally, the work undertaken in this study motivated children to make links between different aspects of their experience and their learning. They could discuss concepts such as instructions, changing properties of materials and temperature in the context of texts which were situated in their daily lives. This metacognitive intertexuality is key to children's learning. Popular culture can provide a means of locating new understandings within a familiar discourse. For the children in these nurseries, the Teletubbies created opportunities for learning to be situated in a comfortable landscape and enabled them to integrate home experiences with schooled literacy.

None of this is surprising to us, yet the curriculum is still dominated by the interests and values of the dominant groups in society. Our nurseries and schools appear to be ignoring the changes in literacy practices which are occurring around them. Children are now engaged with a wider range of texts, both printed and tele-visual, outside of educational establishments than they are within (Millard, 1997). It is essential that early years educators recognize this 'changing landscape of communication' (Kress, 1997, p160) which affects many children's literacy practices in the home, and respond to it appropriately. For children from working-class communities, this is crucial if the literacy landscapes of home and nursery are to be brought a little closer together.

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